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Special training for library work

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Special Training for Library Work

Electra C. Doren, Dayton (O.) public library

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The librarian of today is a person with a distinct ideal of the mission of books to people and a distinct purpose to realize that ideal. He is a product of an epochal movement toward popular education as a foundation for popular government.

"It has been somewhat characteristic of our foremost librarians," says Mr Fletcher, of Amherst, "that they were, and worked as, men of genius rather than men of routine." But I believe that even they would have been glad, had such a thing been possible as special training for their work, and that the very lack of it has, no doubt, with other compelling circumstances, made them bequeath to and impress upon the succeeding generation of librarians the need of it, and even to force the opportunity for it.

The only kind of training for library work possible previous to 1888 was training in rather than for it, and in no sense was it special or formal. It might be called training for library training. The means for this kind of training were such as grew out of the adaptation of crude materials, a few books, and no appliances to speak of, to the occasional requirements of a few seekers after books. And even the means to meet the limited and occasional call of the few were far from satisfactory; yet every failure and every success led to further trial. These experiments in library management were going on simultaneously in libraries isolated from each

other until the formation of the American Library Association fixed in the minds of librarians the idea of discussing and of comparing ways of doing the same things, and of combining and unifying into principle the results of experience. This was the first step towards special training for library work. Fifteen years later the New York State library school was founded and in quick succession thereafter three other schools, under the direction of its graduates.

Special training for library work is a term more easily described than defined. Experience in library routine in any or all of the departments of work in one library is not "special training," though it may induce fitness for such work and lead to specialization; neither should the listening to lectures on library subjects or mere class, club, or seminar discussion of library methods be called training.

A course in library science may be more or less comprehensive and detailed according as it is intended to be elementary, secondary, or higher instruction, but in no case is it *training* in a special sense unless the subjects in the course are made to cover a definite field, and there is repeated drill in developing principles and applying them to specific problems set for the student to solve within a given time. Inspection and correction of his work by the instructor, practice and test for the student until he has mastered the

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difficulties, and can really do a given amount of work in a given time according to a definite standard of thoroughness, accuracy, and form, properly constitute special training. I shall not attempt to outline such a course, but for the subjects which would be included in a systematic study of library economy, the handbooks of the library schools, and the proceedings of the American Library Association, session of 1898, will be found informing; and, as showing the adaptation and selection of subjects for elementary training, the annual reports of those libraries where it has been attempted by class work, as at Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Dayton.

Though now no longer in an experimental stage, the library schools, as shown by the contributions of their directors to the recently published A. L. A. proceedings of 1898, show that they are still binding experience to experience in the selection and extension of their courses, and in the formation and guidance of their respective policies, both to set the pace and to meet the demands of the library work of the future as they conceive it in its relation to social and educational development. The advocates of special library training do not claim that it can make either libraries, the library clientage, or even librarians, but it has been proven that training for the individual helps in the making of all three, and is bound to determine tendency not only in the detail work of the library, but in the higher forms of library extension.

The schools are emphasizing the conception which certain librarians have already embodied in their work, namely, that the library, particularly the free circulating library, is a social force in the body social, and must be administered as such; and, further than this, that the mechanism of library administration should be adequate to the spirit of such a conception of the library's function.

To those who have to do with the modern library movement from the administrative side, to executives of large libraries, but particularly to trustees of

libraries large or small, the trend of library training, as shown by the summary of the first ten years of its history, must, in itself, be significant as the reflex of experience and effort toward meeting, by means of preparation of the worker, the problems of library work.

What are the particulars which experience has shown must be emphasized in the training of the future? And what the lines upon which library training is seeking to specialize? It is to be noted that the educational requirements for entrance to the technical schools are being raised instead of lowered; that the scheme of subjects taught is a broadening one and is socially sympathetic; and that along with all this the technical drill is more rigid, and the grade of personal qualifications and technical attainment for graduation more exacting. While this is true in a degree of all of the schools it is particularly true of the oldest of all the schools, that at Albany. In all of them a liberal education as a basis for the special technical training is a *sine qua non*, and the reasons are not far to seek. The classification, accounting and catalog records are the core around which the work of a library of necessity revolves. They must be correct, accurate, and systematic in form and contents. Scholarship for bibliographic work, for classification and cataloging, must, with the advancement of science and the arts, and the increased size and variety of book collections themselves, be more minute, varied, and special. In other words, he who would have power to analyze the contents of any and all books, and construct the forms whereby such analysis becomes a permanently usable record for the investigator, must not only have wide and varied and special knowledge to draw from, but the skill to organize it in the plainest possible form and in the shortest possible time. Added to such knowledge and skill is the personal element, the cohering, coördinating sympathy which senses out the paths by which the average mind is likely to make its approaches to the knowledge it is in

search of. From such knowledge and sympathy will result careful selection and arrangement of subject-heading and cross-reference. The cataloger thus leads the seeker not only to the particular thing he is looking for, but opens up the field of possible research, and points out all the bypaths and connecting lines between related subjects. It is this particular faculty which differentiates the real cataloger from the tabulating machine for which he is too often mistaken. It makes of his work the living link between the reader and the storehouse of books, and all the more living if his catalog is used for the public by an assistant thoroughly acquainted with its structure, whether he be able or not to make a catalog.

Second, it will be seen that the spiritual ideal of the influence of books is specializing into a more intimate inquiry as to the fruitful sowing of them among readers. There is psychology in library work. What books to what people? is the question. The ideal with which we started out, of bringing books and people together, means now the bringing of good books, reliable books, true books, interesting books, timely books and bright books to all people everywhere, whatever their age or condition.

And, lastly, it is once more evident that technical skill must again be brought into play, and this time for final practical reason of expenditure. Economy demands expedition and certainty in method, for the most expensive of all service is that which has to be revised and done over again. Progress in attaining library ideals is really conditioned by the conception of *what* it is, ability to do, and ability to pay.

When time is paid for it is money. None but the skillful producer can accomplish permanent work and save time on it. It is his business to cut out waste of all kinds and degrees, to correlate system with system and to make them to an extent self-accounting and self-acting, to avoid duplicating and overlapping, to lop off unnecessaries and to condense and make complete the

necessary. The cry and exhortation of Carlyle, "Produce, man, produce!" is becoming more importunate, and the deeper the spiritual convictions of the library worker the greater will be his energy and ingenuity in devising the means for direct and sure communication with his spiritual ideal through the material conditions surrounding him. For he is supported and continually led on by the aspiration and love which run to the root of social needs in so far as they are to be answered from the use of books.

What is true of the higher technical training given at Albany, Pratt, Drexel, and the Illinois state library school is not less true of elementary training. For the same subjects, though less in amount, are taught where there have been from time to time shorter and more general courses of library instruction, such as have been given through university extension lectures, summer library schools, and the training classes for local apprentices and library assistants in public libraries. Summer schools varying from five to six weeks in the length of their courses have been held in this country for some years at Amherst, Mass., at Madison, Wis., at Albany, N. Y., and last summer at Columbus, Ohio, and in the Cleveland public library.

Library training classes of courses extending over one and two years for apprentices and library assistants have been instituted in the Los Angeles and Dayton public libraries. The Forbes library, Northampton, and the public libraries of Butte, Mont., Denver, Col., and Hartford, Conn., have also had classes and clubs for library discussion. In England the Library assistants' association has set apart a week annually for a summer school or institute.

These, I believe, cover the various grades and shades of special library training now in operation. The important thing is that recognition of the fact that the body of library science so far as developed at the present time cannot be an accidental acquirement, but must be regularly learned as other

things are learned, is gaining ground rapidly; and the action of two public libraries in this country in establishing classes for the express purpose of training assistants already holding positions in them, and only *incidentally* admitting applicants from the outside, certainly places a significant emphasis upon the matter.

Experience throughout elementary as well as higher training would seem to show that whether the training shall eventuate in higher, second rate, or third rate skill, other things being equal, is rather more dependent on the student's previous educational equipment than upon his previous experience in library work.

In the present stage of library development and specialization "working up" is not so practicable or possible as might at first appear, except for geniuses for whom no one pretends to account.

To begin library work with dusting books, and to keep on dusting books, will not, even after many years of dusting, make a reference clerk, cataloger, or librarian, however faithfully the dusting may have been done. This I know is contrary to opinion and practice now generally current.

It is true, nevertheless, that the desk assistant for lack of a systematic and comprehensive even though a limited view of his work, is likely always to remain a desk assistant. When custom is dull he can do nothing but wait for custom unless he be instructed in forms of minor clerical work; but there are real obstructions in the way of his improvement, even in this limited direction. Some one has to teach him, inspect and correct his work, and all on time paid for both teacher and learner. Owing to circumstances, the instruction is likely also to be fitful and irregular, lacking in uniformity for the succession of assistants whom it may be necessary to prepare for the work; nor can the results obtained be so satisfactory to the library as would be the case if instruction were uniform and consistent. Again in the case of reference work,

the untrained assistant may have a gift for happy guessing. Repeated experience in the same lines of inquiry will gradually gain for him some skill in handling his own library's collection, but his range is still too confined, for without intimate knowledge of the classification and of the structure of the catalog, without some reliable bibliographic acquaintance with the book world, his value, though appreciated, cannot but be local and uncertain, and after years of work perhaps, his own outlook for a position is a precarious one. His toil and his experience, because not laid out in the first place in a systematic manner, have not, after all, brought him to an independent degree of skill. As a worker, certainly this much were due him, that he be developed professionally and allowed to stand on merit, rather than that he be retained on sufferance, because he has done his unaided best, when with the right help he could and would have done so much more. A standard, therefore, there should be, of "best" quite as much for the worker's sake as for the work's sake.

Again, the manysidedness and close interdependence of the parts of library work make it impossible to train completely for one thing only, without training in a measure in all; and the multifarious demands upon a library force, particularly in the ordinary middle sized public library, make it indispensable that the work of some of the assistants be interchangeable in the clerical routine of loan, order, accession, and catalog departments, as well as in giving intelligent aid to readers in the use of the catalogs and indexes of the reference room. These assistants are helpers, not heads of departments charged with the responsibility of determining form or policy for any of the lines of work. But to be real helpers they must be masters of the mechanical forms to be used, able to produce a clear and accurate record, and must have an acquaintance with the nomenclature of bibliography, classification, and cataloging, otherwise they will be

unable to follow the simplest directions. They may in time be able to work independently of supervision, but there is still a wide difference between the trained routine worker of limited education and the expert specialist who adds to a knowledge of precedents a safe knowledge of expedients, and who, because of all this, is creative in his own line and a final authority. Without definite lines of special library training laid out for the improvement of the local assistant, the association of the trained specialist with the untrained worker does *not* so surely contribute to the gradual elevation of the latter's methods as might at first be supposed, and that for an obvious reason. The compromises, the continual readjustment of method and lowering of standard made necessary to meet the capacity and attainments of the untrained person, tend not only to nullify the effectiveness of the better and more scientific methods, but to undermine and destroy in our specialist those very qualities and attainments on account of which he has been employed, and which we expect to leave their impress upon our library system. So insidious and so sure is the effect of such conditions upon professional standards and ideals that, other things being equal, the trained person would be justified from a practical, business point of view, in accepting a lower rate of remuneration in a library where assistants were trained than in one where no such training was deemed expedient or possible. On the other hand, without the help of the routine worker for the mechanical details, the expert cannot effect an amount of work at all justifying the outlay of the library for his special capacity, for his energies are diverted from the lines in which no one but himself can act, and they are consumed in routine which might be fully as well performed at a less expensive rate. His time should be free for the permanent lines of the work, and for solving the knotty and intricate questions which are always arising—instead of doing the mechanical work of lettering, we will say, the notation on

hundreds of book labels, or in filing cards, or writing in headings for thousands of catalog entries. But if the library goes only so far as to give him ignorant and untrained assistants, it only adds to his task that of teaching, correcting, and inspecting their work, for without such inspection the very accuracy and certainty of the chief records of the library, for which the expert help has been employed, will be vitiated by faulty and unreliable entries, and when they are most needed as authority they will fail to bear the test. The work which has been paid for at a rate to have insured against this calamity proves in the end valueless.

Since a public institution is expected to draw the greater part of its helpers from the community that supports it, it is clear that for some time to come the local assistant will have to be trained where he is. In any event, supervision and inspection of the untrained product must take the time of some one for the task, hence it would seem to be economy, where there are several assistants requiring such supervision, to consolidate it into one period for all, to systematize and formulate the codes of rules for the necessary routine of the library, and to place the whole thing on a definite basis of regular class work, drill and test. For the integrity required on the business side of library management must be an inner regenerating spirit working from within outward, fitting and adapting each system and each individual under that system to the needs and means of that particular library.

Moreover, instruction by class training has specific advantages. It is systematic, purposeful, uniform, limited. It forces the student into the habit of taking care of the moments, and of expecting to produce something within a limit of time. It substitutes tangible results, as evidenced by class work in the place of mere opinion in judging of an assistant's abilities. It furnishes a basis for intelligent selection and comparison of the capacities of several assistants for a variety of work, and it faces the worker with something defi-

nite to do according to a definite way of doing. Given desire upon his part for training, and confidence in his ability to profit by it, the aim of the instructors must be for correct form, according to stated standard of thoroughness, accuracy, and speed. And from first to last it is standard which must be enforced, for it is exactly here that the local assistant has been most neglected, and here, too, is precisely where great waste, and oftentimes serious friction, arises in the administration; for, through the natural gravitation of work to those who have capacity and willingness, injustice arises, the better worker in proportion to his usefulness being less well paid than the less spirited and alert one. The poison of a vague dissatisfaction arising from such unequal distribution will finally permeate the library atmosphere, the unsystematic, or showy, blustering worker being even less content than the one who carries forward the routine and bears the brunt as best he may.

Insensibly the expenses of library administration creep up, and that more rapidly than the library fund increases. The system upon which a library is conducted, the thoroughness and fitness which the librarian and assistants bring to their work, must be looked to and depended upon for preventing the waste and innumerable leakages from misdirected energies, faulty methods, and indifferent spirit.

Special training for library work does not encourage drones and the unfit to continue in it. If made the prime qualification for appointment, it relieves the administration of much embarrassment from pressure of political and social influence in the selection of assistants.

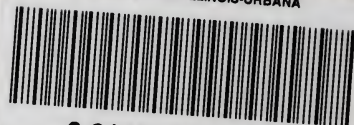
The buying and housing of a collection of books is only the plant for the operation of a library; but the running of the plant, its service to the public, is

a problem of administration, and productiveness in proportion as the cost of production becomes for the executive and the trustee the criterion, not it may be of the library's real usefulness, but certainly of their own good stewardship.

The vital point of contact, the opportunity for direct personal touch between the public and the library, must be through the library assistant who personally meets with the public, and this is the last and best reason for training him. His position must come to be regarded by himself and his employers as being in and of itself a "calling," not a mere way-station to large salary or executive position. While library trustees and librarians certainly have a distinct responsibility to discharge in requiring a standard of attainment for each department of library work, and should in all possible ways supply the conditions and furnish the incitements to maintain the personal effectiveness of trained people, nevertheless for the local assistant the final responsibility is with himself, and he is the strongest who himself takes the initiative in interpreting his functions broadly.

Not by contention, nor by adroitness, nor by suavity merely, will he come to an understanding of his work and his opportunities in it; but by the earnest and steady pursuit of ideals of thoroughness and expedition, and the gaining of positive technical information and skill. Without these honest foundations first, and without intimate spiritual fitness won through reading and through following up the wants of the readers that come to him daily, he will never come to that supporting sense of his own power which tells him that he has a place to fill, nor will he in any other way attain the patience and fervor which will make him sufficient for the things that will be required of him.

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